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Philippines: The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), including areas of operation and activities since 2009

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1. Overview

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a centre of excellence of the US Department of Homeland Security based at the University of Maryland, states that the Abu Sayyaf [also spelled as Abu Sayyef or Abou Sayyef] Group (ASG), or just Abu Sayyaf as it is also known, was formed in 1991 by "radical" Moro National Liberation Front members (START n.d.a). The group is also known as Al Harakat Al Islamiyya (Canada 22 Dec. 2010; Australia 9 Nov. 2010) (which START translates as "Bearers of the Sword"), Al Harakat-ul Al Islamiyya, Al-Harakatul-Islamia, Al Harakat Al Aslamiya, Abou Sayaf Armed Band and Mujahideen Commando Freedom Fighters (Canada 22 Dec. 2010; Australia 9 Nov. 2010). The *Political Handbook of the World (PHW)* calls it "the most radical of the fundamentalist Muslim insurgent groups" (PHW 2011, 1138). The group is on the list of "terrorist" organizations in the US (US Aug. 2011, 198; START n.d.a), Australia (Australia 9 Mar. 2011), the UK (UK 11 July 2011) and Canada (Canada 22 Dec. 2010).

Several sources indicate that the ASF aims to create an independent Islamic state in the south Philippines (Canada 22 Dec. 2010; Australia 9 Nov. 2010; US Aug. 2011, 200; START n.d.a). More specifically, the creation of an independent state "encompassing parts of Southern Thailand, the island of Borneo, the Sulu Archipelago, and Mindanao, areas where Moro Muslims, a minority ethnic group in the Philippines, make up the majority of the local population" (ibid.).

Sources state that the group is linked to Al Qaeda (AFP 28 July 2011; Canada 22 Dec. 2010; START n.d.a; *The Washington Times* 5 Feb. 2012). Sources also indicate that the group is allied with Jemaah Islamiyah (START n.d.a; Canada 22 Dec. 2010; *The New York Times* 15 Jan. 2009), "the Southeast Asian terrorist network linked to al Qaeda and implicated in numerous bombings in Indonesia" (ibid.). However, according to START,

[t]he extent of the ASG's cooperation with al-Qaeda is thought to have diminished following the post-9/11 crackdown on the latter. Still, ASG members

have trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and some continue to receive operational guidance from al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists hiding in or passing through Philippines. (n.d.a)

2. Areas of Operation

Several sources indicate that the ASG is active in the southern Philippines (START n.d.a; The Mackenzie Institute n.d.b; *The New York Times* 15 Jan. 2009; AFP 28 July 2011; US Aug. 2011, 200). More specifically, it is reported to be active in the provinces of the Sulu Archipelago (ibid., 160, 200), Mindanao (ibid.; The Mackenzie Institute n.d.b) and the Zamboanga peninsula (US Aug. 2011, 201), and to have expanded into other areas of the Philippines, such as Manila (The Mackenzie Institute n.d.b; US Aug. 2011, 201). It is also active in Malaysia (ibid.; Australia 9 Nov. 2010; The Mackenzie Institute n.d.b) and Indonesia (ibid.). The US *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2010* notes that the ASG has

[s]ought safe haven in areas of the southern Philippines, specifically in the Sulu archipelago and Mindanao [because] Philippine government control and the rule of law in this area are weak due to rugged terrain, poverty, and local Muslim minority resentment of central governmental policies. (US Aug. 2011, 160)

3. Leaders

The annual edition of *PHW* identified Yasser Igasan as the party's leader in 2009 and 2010 (*PHW* 2010, 1161; ibid. 2011, 1139). Both START (n.d.b) and the *Europa World Online* (n.d.) also name Yasser Igasan as a key leader of the group. There are a number of other key leaders, such as Radulan Sahiron (START n.d.a; Australia 9 Nov. 2010; US Aug. 2011, 200), Isnilon Hapilon and Gumbahli Jumdail (ibid.).

4. Membership

An Australian government report on terrorist organizations notes that the "ASG membership consists primarily of young Tausug Filipino Muslims from the Sulu archipelago, but the ASG [also] attracts poverty-stricken unemployed young Muslims from across the southern Philippines" (Australia 9 Nov. 2010). The US *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010* indicates that, for the past five years, the ASG has "reportedly used child soldiers in combat or auxiliary roles" (US 8 Apr. 2011, 1, 15).

Sources state that the ASG has between 200 and 400 members (START n.d.a; AFP 3 Mar. 2012; AP 8 Mar. 2012). Two sources also indicate that the group is believed to have only a few hundred militants (*PHW* 2010, 1161; AFP 21 Feb. 2012), "down from about 2,000 a decade ago" (ibid.). According to Philippine army colonel Ricardo Visaya, the "Basilan [island]-based Abu Sayyaf faction ... has 60 to 70 gunmen, who are led by a commander identified as Khair Mundos" (AP 8 Mar. 2012).

5. Criminal Activities and Arrests

5.1 Targets and Types of Activities

The group is known to target Western Christians (Australia 9 Nov. 2010; START n.d.a), Filipino people (ibid.) and representatives of the Philippine government (Australia 9 Nov. 2010). Sources report that, from 2009 to 2012, the

ASG has been involved in the following criminal activities:

- Kidnappings (*The New York Times* 15 Jan. 2009; US Aug. 2011, 200; *ibid.* 8 Apr. 2011, 1; *Europa World Online* n.d.);
- Beheadings (*PHW* 2011, 1139; Kyodo News 29 July 2011);
- Killings (AP 28 July 2011; AFP 28 July 2011; *Europa World Online* n.d.; *Daily Star* 29 July 2011; Kyodo News 29 July 2011; AFP 3 Mar. 2012); and
- Bombings (AP 8 Aug. 2010; *Manila Bulletin* 6 Aug. 2010; AP 31 May 2011; US 8 Apr. 2011, 1; The Jamestown Foundation 10 Feb. 2011; *The Straits Times* 31 May 2011; AFP 3 Mar. 2012).

5.2 Activities in 2009 and 2010

START's Global Terrorism Database indicates that, between January 2009 and December 2010, the group was suspected of being responsible for 38 attacks resulting in 49 fatalities and the injury of 124 people (START n.d.c). The attacks occurred in the following cities: Indanan, Isabela, Jolo, Lantawan, Lamitan, Maimbung, Maluso, Panguataran, Patikul, Sumisip, Taburan, Talipao and Zamboanga (*ibid.*).

Specific examples include the January 2009 abduction of three Red Cross workers in the southern Philippines (US Aug. 2011, 200; *The New York Times* 15 Jan. 2009; BBC 28 Mar. 2009) who were later released (US Aug. 2011, 200; BBC 18 Apr. 2009; *The Philippine Star* 13 July 2009). As well, the group reportedly participated in a raid on a Basilan jail in 2009 that led to the escape of Muslim militants (AFP 21 Feb. 2012; *Time* 20 Feb. 2012). In August 2009, about 20 government soldiers and more than 20 militants were reportedly killed in clashes between ASG members and government troops on the island of Basilan (*Europa World Online* n.d.; BBC 13 Aug. 2009).

According to the US *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010*, in 2010 the ASG was linked to the killings of soldiers, police officers, and government officials, "bombings that caused civilian casualties and kidnappings for ransom" (US 8 Apr. 2011, 1). For instance, in August 2010, the ASG was blamed for the bombing of an airport in Zamboanga that killed 2 people and injured 24, including the governor of Sulu island province (AP 8 Aug. 2010; *Manila Bulletin* 6 Aug. 2010; BBC 6 Aug. 2010), who had "led aggressive campaigns against the Abu Sayyaf" (*ibid.*). The US *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2010* notes that "the group increased its activities in 2010, which included multiple attacks on civilians, humanitarian organizations, a church, and military and police personnel" (US Aug. 2011, 200). It also states that

ASG's most complex attack occurred on the island of Basilan in April 2010 when the group launched a synchronized assault including the use of a vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) which resulted in at least 11 deaths and 10 injured. In the attack, armed operatives detonated two VBIEDs and fired weapons at several targets. A third improvised explosive device (IED) targeting a judge was later disarmed by police. There is an alarming trend of indiscriminate ASG attacks directed at civilians as exemplified by the February 2010 shooting that resulted in at least 11 deaths in a small village in the island of Basilan. (*ibid.*)

5.3 Activities in 2011 and 2012

In 2011 and 2012, a number of media reports chronicled a series of violent attacks in which the ASG were implicated (AP 31 May 2011; *Daily Star* 29 July 2011; *Business World* 9 Jan. 2012; AFP 3 Mar. 2012; *The Philippine Star* 5 Mar. 2012). For example:

- In May 2011, ASG militants were suspected of launching two bomb attacks that wounded 5 army soldiers on Basilan Island's Sumisip town (AP 31 May 2011; *The Straits Times* 31 May 2011).
- In July 2011, ASG militants killed 7 Philippine marines and injured more than 20 others during a clash with government forces in the southern Sulu province (*Daily Star* 29 July 2011; Kyodo News 29 July 2011; AFP 28 July 2011).
- In November 2011, ASG militants were believed responsible for the bombing of a hotel in the city of Zamboanga that killed three people and injured 27 others (BBC 28 Nov. 2011; AP 29 Nov. 2011; *Sun Star* 28 Nov. 2011).
- In December 2011, ASG militants were suspected of bombing two bridges, one in Barangay Taung in Patikul and the other in Barangay Kandayok in Panamao (*Business World* 9 Jan. 2012; *Malaya* 9 Jan. 2012).
- In January 2012, the ASG was linked to the bombing of another bridge in a town of Sulu province (ibid.; *Business World* 9 Jan. 2012) in order "to isolate their areas from intrusion" (ibid.).
- In March 2012, police linked the ASG to the bombing of a commercial district on the southern island of Jolo that caused 2 deaths and 13 injuries (AFP 3 Mar. 2012; *The Philippine Star* 5 Mar. 2012).

In addition, sources indicate that the group was involved in several abductions of foreign nationals and Philippine citizens in the southern Philippines (AFP 21 Feb. 2012; *The New York Times* 5 Jan. 2012; BBC 4 Jan. 2012). For instance, kidnappers abducted an Australian man in December 2011 and demanded ransom for his release (ibid.; *The New York Times* 5 Jan. 2012; see also *Time* 2 Feb. 2012). The Director of Operations for the Philippine Army in Zamboanga Sibugay province indicates that, although ASG's motives for kidnappings do not appear to be political, "the ransom money is used to support the goals of militant Islamic organizations in the area, particularly for the purchase of weapons and other military supplies" (*The New York Times* 5 Jan. 2012).

6. State Response

In August 2010, the government

[f]iled a petition with a court on Basilan seeking to outlaw Abu Sayyaf as a terrorist organization ... [I]f approved, the petition would allow the Government to arrest members of Abu Sayyaf without them having committed any crime other than belonging to the group, and would enable the Government to seek assistance from foreign law enforcement agencies in order to freeze Abu Sayyaf's funding from external sources. (*Europa World Online* n.d.)

Information on the results of the petition could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

According to the *PHW* 2011, "military efforts to capture the militants were ongoing in 2009 and 2010" (*PHW* 2011, 1139). For instance, in 2009, the authorities announced the capture of Abdul Basir Latip, "who was alleged to have

been involved in the kidnapping of foreigners and Christians" (*Europa World Online* n.d.). The authorities have also announced that security forces killed Albader Parad, a senior ASG commander held responsible for the abduction of Red Cross workers (*ibid.*).

In 2010, a founding member of the ASG, Madhatta Asagal Haipe, was extradited to the United States and sentenced to 23 years in prison for his role in the 1995 kidnapping of US citizens (US Aug. 2011, 200). On 21 February 2010, security forces killed five ASG militants and ASG sub-commander Albader Parad in the city of Jolo (*ibid.*, 30).

Sources report that, in February 2012, the ASG commander, Umbra Jumdail, was killed by the Philippine military in a US-backed airstrike (*Time* 2 Feb. 2012; AP 5 Feb. 2012). Also in February 2012, police forces captured Abdulpattah Ismael who was involved in several crimes, including the 2007 beheadings of 10 marines and a 2009 attack that allowed 31 Muslim insurgents to escape from a provincial jail (*Time* 20 Feb. 2012; AFP 21 Feb. 2012). An ASG sub-commander, Abdulhan Ussih, was also arrested in February in Zamboanga city by a joint team from the Philippine National Police's Criminal Investigation and Detection Group and the Intelligence Unit of the Philippine Air Force (GMA News 15 Feb. 2012).

The Associated Press also reports that two ASG militants, Anni Idris and Serham Akalon, who have been implicated in beheadings and kidnappings in 2001 and 2007, were captured by Philippine troops on 7 March 2012 (AP 8 Mar. 2012).

The US *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2010* indicates that the numerous islands in the area where the ASG has sought refuge

[m]ake it a difficult region for authorities to monitor, and a range of licit and illicit activities that occur there, such as worker migration, tourism, and trade, pose additional challenges to identifying and countering the terrorist threat. (US Aug. 2011, 160)

The report also indicates that, although the Philippines have improved surveillance of the maritime boundaries, "traditional smuggling and piracy groups have provided an effective cover for terrorist activities, such as movement of personnel, equipment, and funds" (*ibid.*). Sources report that US special forces, stationed in the south of the country, have been training local troops in how to deal with the militant groups (AFP 21 Feb. 2012; BBC 13 Aug. 2009). However, according to START,

[d]espite the concurrent efforts of the Philippine government and US counterterrorism advisers, the Abu Sayyaf Group remains a very active threat in the region and one of the main obstacles to peace in the Southern Philippines. (n.d.a)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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